Building Fire and Resilience in Marriage: What Research Tells Us

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Objectives

- What are the most important factors in predicting strong marriages (those with sustainable “fire”)?
- What keeps a marriage resilient, even under stress?
- What should we expect a good marriage program to include?
Background

- Too many marriages still fail, especially those of color and low-income
- Fear of marriage failure still high
- Marriage education and support still underutilized
- Resilience literature supports the ability of families to adapt/function under stress and challenge
What Does Resilience Look Like?

A resilient couple and family:

- Responds effectively and capably to the challenges they face
- Gets the resources or assets they need to cope and adjust
- Bounces back more quickly from stresses and critical issues that they face

Less resilient couples and families get overwhelmed and respond to stress poorly
The Family Resilience Pyramid

Resilience = Ability to mobilize strengths when risks occur
Building Strong Couple Connections

- The foundation of a resilient family
- Necessary components:
  1. Commitment and Trust
  2. Companionship and Time Together
  3. Communication and Problem solving skills
Common Threats to Couple Commitments

1. Living in a “throw-away” society
   - Weak commitments to things and people

2. Ease of divorce
   - A culture of getting out rather than trying

3. Competing obligations
   - So many other commitments: work, kids, friends, hobbies, etc.

4. Periods of separation
   - Long separations add stress and create new commitments

5. Competing work schedules
   - Have little time for each other because of conflicting schedules
Companionship and Relationship Strength

- It is really true that “the family that plays together stays together!”
- All studies show that time spent together in leisure and recreation builds resilience and strength
- Studies also show that couples who spend little time together have weaker resilience-related skills
Not All Activities Have the Same Benefits

- **Joint Activities** (highly interactive, playful)
  - Most benefit for couple/family strength
  - Ex: playing games, outdoor activities, mealtimes

- **Parallel Activities** (together but little interaction)
  - Some benefit for families but not much
  - Ex: TV/movie watching, spectator sports

- **Segregated Activities** (activities done alone)
  - Personal benefits but hurtful if done a lot
  - Ex: Reading, computer games, internet, TV solo
Communication Key: Ratio of Positive to Negative Messages

- The ratio is key! 5+ to 1 (Gottman)
Building Strong Social Support Connections

- Strong families also have strong social support networks around them.
- Networks of friends and family provide needed resources and encouragement in times of need.
- Research on military families experiencing deployments finds that strong friendship networks are key to successful coping.
Example: Relationship Assets and Military Separation Adjustment

Presence of Social Assets and High Adjustment to Deployment

% Experiencing High Adjustment

Number of Assets Reported

- Deployed
- Deployed, Returned
Building Strong Community Connections

- Our communities have lots of resources that can connect us to support and fun things to do
- Many of us are unaware of all that our communities have to offer
- Strong families use their community resources well
## Community Connections Help: Example of Military Marriages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Work Organization-Related Connections</th>
<th>Coped Very well</th>
<th>Coped Poorly</th>
<th>Difference (High-Low)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comfortable using military support agencies</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with concern of spouse’s unit for families</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>26</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Support Connections</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participated in a Family Support Group</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have person outside home to talk to</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willing to turn to neighbor, friend or family member for help</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Willing to turn to religious leader for help</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>13</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marriage Connections</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfied with marriage at present time</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>20</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The Challenge:
The Strengths of American Families

Family Strength Assets

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% of assets possessed by average families</th>
<th>Economic Asset*</th>
<th>Communication Asset</th>
<th>Problem-solving Asset</th>
<th>Social Support Asset**</th>
<th>Family Cohesion Asset</th>
<th>Religious Support Asset</th>
<th>Total Assets**</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;$30,000</td>
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<td>$30,000 - $50,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>&gt;$50,000</td>
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*Economic Asset
**Social Support Asset
**Family Cohesion Asset
**Religious Support Asset
**Total Assets